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BOOK REVIEW
It Isn't that Simple: Globalization, History and Inevitability

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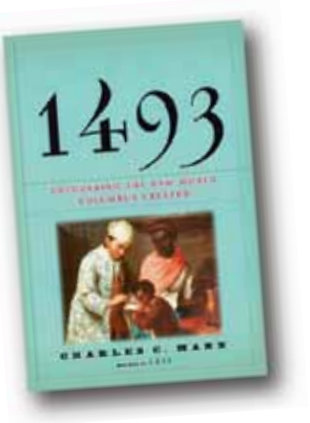
Charles C. Mann, 1493: *Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* (New York: Knopf, 2011).

When the Soviet Union crumbled in 1989, capitalism emerged as the dominant economic structure for world trade. Even with the rise of communist China as a global economic force, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have worked to ensure that free-market capitalism sets the structure for global exchanges of wealth and resources. Historians, eager to capture the whiff of contemporary issues, have dug into the records of the past searching for the beginning of globalization. In 1992, urged on by the 500th anniversary of Columbus' first voyage, historians began to push back the start date of the world system to coincide with the expansion of the Spanish empire in the wake of Columbus' "discovery." Charles Mann's *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created* represents both the best and worst of what can be defined as "journalistic history." Mann seeks to explain the impact of global commerce on local cultures and environments, something he attributes to Columbus' 1492 voyage. In the first pages of the book, Mann argues that the Spanish occupation of the Americas following 1492 "began the era of *globalization*–the single, turbulent exchange of goods and services that today engulfs the entire habitable world."(7) Part history, part travel tale, part activist manifesto, *1493* is a book of dizzying complexity. To tell this very big story, Mann takes his reader on a world tour through time, touching down occasionally here and there, now and then, to give us a closer perspective of how a global economic system influenced the lives of individuals and their immediate environs, both past and present. In his book we read about the Spanish silver trade, the English tobacco trade, sugar production in the West Indies, rubber plantations in South America, the potato blight in Ireland, corn growing in China, resorts in the Philippines, and dozens of other case studies stretching across the past 500 years. On one page this reader found himself reading about Spanish galleons in the early sixteenth century; when he turned the pages, he witnessed American imperialism in the late nineteenth century, then



global capitalism in the 1990s. In this sweeping treatment, time and history seem to have lost all context.

As such, Mann's book is what academic historians call Whig history: history writing that is driven by the present, or works that seek to explain the past based on the assumed realities of the present. To be sure, historians should try to explain how we got to where we are today, but they must do so by starting with the past, and assessing it on its own terms. Historians should let the past unfold within the context of its own time and then draw insight from that past to help shed light on the present. In Whig history, like Mann's *1493,* the present is the starting point and the records of the past are marshaled to serve the agenda of the present. All of this makes history seem inevitable. The past is stripped of much of its human agency and is presented as a steamroller pushing indiscriminately towards the present.

Mann moves the reader rapidly not only through time and place but also across disciplinary boundaries. His material cites the works of academic historians, anthropologists, archeologist, sociologists, geographers, biographers, chemists, geologist, economists, and political scientists, as well as a host of government and non-government think-tanks, advocate groups, and research centers, all while occasionally giving us the voice of the individual farmer, fisher, boater, activist, and entrepreneur. As a journalist, Mann not only incorporates the published work of this long list of academic and non-academic experts, but he also takes the extra step of interviewing many of them. Many of the book's quotes are from these interviews. By doing so, Mann the journalist can get the experts to speak more informally and thus he is able to work their expert knowledge into his more casual narrative style. In the end, the book is certainly more readable than most scholarly

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publications on the history of globalization, but this readability comes as a simplified version of complex issues.

Mann's discussion of the nineteenth-century guano industry is as good an example as any among his scores of case studies. Mann provides the reader with an understanding of the science of guano as a fertilizer, the history of agricultural reform in nineteenth-century Europe, the brutality of the labor of guano extraction, the journalistic appeal to expose guano slavery, and the imperial competition between the United States and Britain to control the world's guano islands in the Pacific Ocean. To do this, Mann brings in the insight of historians, scientists, political scientists, and economists; often via interviews. Although Mann tells a rich and interesting story that stitches together the complexities of academic disciplines, in the end, his story is driven by his fear of globalism, which is exposed in this case with his direct comparison between the guano cartel of the nineteenth century and today's OPEC.

This journalistic and whiggish approach takes what are scores of individual and complex case studies, irons out the uniqueness of each place and time, and stitches them together into a fabric that Mann proclaims is global capitalism. To suggest that global capitalism is the product of Columbus's "discovery" of the New World sheds the important context of 500 years of economic history and ignores the often painful development of that economic system. Just because we have global capitalism today certainly does not mean it was an inevitable result of the sixteenth-century Spanish silver trade.

So what is Mann's final assessment of this world that Columbus created? Following a passage that examines the life of a contemporary Amazonian farmer named Dona Rosario, Mann writes: "They [Amazonians] had been forced to live covert, hidden lives, always worried about dispossession. Now they would be free to live in their creation, the world's richest garden."(488) The success of Rosario's farm, according to Mann, was due to her acceptance of non-native, market-oriented crops and the use of new technologies such as freezers and cell phones that enabled more successful engagement with the global foods market. Thanks to globalization, Rosario found economic happiness. Yet just a few pages later, Mann takes us to the Filipino terrace farms at Ifugao, which have been identified as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Mann tells of the economic collapse of the terrace farms and efforts to introduce heirloom rice production for export to Europe and the United States. Mann concludes that "The global market is not the solution, activists say, but the problem! These supposed do-gooders are just hooking Ifugao into the worldwide network of exchange, making them dependent as never before on the whims of faraway yuppies!"(500) Thus, in this story, global capitalism killed indigenous culture and environment.

This inconsistency might actually be the book's real contribution. Globalization is especially complex. Neither the eco-activist nor the corporate capitalist are exclusively right. From an economic worldview, globalization is a smashing success. There is more food and more money than ever. But from a local environmental and cultural perspective it is a crushing defeat. Local culture has been evaporated by globally mass-produced goods ranging from Nike shoes and shorts to Starbucks coffee and McDonald's hamburgers. Mann's final assessment comes at the very end of the book: "Economists have developed theoretical tools for evaluating these incommensurate costs and benefits [of globalism]. But the magnitude of the costs and benefits is less important than their distribution. The gains are diffused and spread around the world, whereas the pain is intense and local."(505) Given that the effect of globalization is most profound on the local level, perhaps more locally oriented case studies would be more enlightening than grand narratives that tend to universalize the unique realities of people and environments all around the world.

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